United Nations E/2010/NGO/10

# Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
26 April 2010

Original: English

**Substantive session of 2010**
New York, 28 June-22 July 2010
Item 2 (c) of the provisional agenda*
**Annual ministerial review: implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women**

## Statement submitted by IPAS, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/2010/100.

10-32836 (E) 100510

Please recycle

## Statement

# Gender equality and women's empowerment through improved maternal health

### Organization

Gender equality and the empowerment of girls, female adolescents and women are essential parts of the development agenda; they are also integral to the promotion and fulfilment of women's most basic human rights: the rights to health, survival and security. In *Dying for Change*, research by the World Bank revealed that women's unequal access to health care was a reflection of their lack of power in society and that women were typically excluded from decision-making in the community and at other levels. Within that context, denying women control over their own reproductive decision-making denies them full citizenship by unduly limiting their self-determination and impeding equal participation in their nations' social, political and economic life.

Goal 1 of the Millennium Development Goals, which calls for eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, is greatly affected by gender equality and women's empowerment. Considerable numbers of girls and women in all regions of the world are unable to prevent unwanted pregnancies and, subsequently, lack the ability to safely end such pregnancies. As many as 182 of those women die each day from unsafe abortions; they are largely resource-poor and are prevented from being able to make decisions about their health and lives.

The women most harmed by lack of access to safe reproductive choices are those without financial means or social connections: women who are poor, young, HIV-positive, survivors of sexual violence, refugees or who are otherwise vulnerable. Economic class clearly affects reproductive and sexual health: higher-income women more consistently use contraception, are better able to negotiate circumstances of sex and have better access than poor women to health services, including safe abortion, regardless of its legal status. When women are able to make safe reproductive choices, they can take better advantage of opportunities for education and employment.

Laws that criminalize abortion, a procedure sought by tens of millions of female adolescents and women each year, constitutes gender-based discrimination and should be reformed. International human rights law creates government obligations with regard to the availability and quality of health care and services, including abortion. Legalizing abortion can decrease financial barriers to health care, including by reducing the prevalence of black-market services, which are often exorbitantly priced. Making safe elective abortion widely available can also dramatically reduce costs associated with managing complications of unsafe abortion.

Reducing and, insofar as possible, eliminating the causes of maternal mortality and morbidity can help achieve the objective of Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals, which focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment. This can be done, inter alia, through improved access to family planning information and services; accessible and affordable antenatal, delivery and post-natal care; high-quality post-abortion care; safe, legal abortion and changing gender-based norms so that women's social status and opportunities do not depend on whether they are mothers or not.

In order to achieve more gender-equal and equitable societies, Governments, civil society organizations and donors must promote multisectoral, South-South and South-North collaboration in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights to ensure that global and local tools, experiences and budgetary allocations benefit women in all parts of the world.